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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, MAY 27 - JUNE 6, 2008

¶1. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital" following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

Hunger Strike Against Property Seizures

¶2. On June 2, eleven Almaty residents who had been on a hunger strike for two weeks held a press briefing for journalists. The residents are protesting an attempt to demolish their houses and seize their land. They allege that the Almaty municipal administration and a local court are biased in favor of a private construction company, City Service Invest Stroy (CSIS), which plans to build commercial buildings on a valuable 7.3 hectare land plot after evicting 264 local residents. The majority of the residents refused to accept the meager compensation they were offered in return. Every time the residents have tried to arrange protests against the seizure, their actions have been disrupted by law enforcement agencies. Some of the residents allege that President Nazarbayev's nephew, Kayrat Satypaldy, has a financial interest in CSIS, which is the reason the municipal administration, courts, and law enforcement agencies have supported the company.

¶3. A group of opposition activists, including Petr Svoik and Marzhan Aspandiyarova from the Azat party, Amirbek Togusov from the National Social Democratic Party (OSDP), and Aynur Kurmanov from the Socialist Resistance movement, attended the press briefing and called on the residents to continue their protest actions. Svoik seconded the residents' claim that someone very influential must be behind the construction company. He said that the residents have created a precedent by standing up for their rights, and the authorities now fear that other people will do the same thing. This was the reason that the authorities have pushed back so hard. The residents reassured the oppositionists that they would continue their fight. They also plan to address a complaint to the OSCE's Almaty office. A police officer observed the press conference, but did not interfere.

Rally in Support of Self-Styled Activist

¶4. On May 31, the day of commemoration for the victims of Stalinist repression, opposition activists organized a rally in Almaty in support of Nurlan Alimbekov. Alimbekov, a self-styled human rights activist, was detained in August 2007 in Shymkent on charges of inciting inter-ethnic and inter-religious hatred through disseminating offensive emails. He is currently being held in the Almaty pre-trial detention center awaiting his third psychiatric evaluation. Participants in the sanctioned rally included relatives and friends of Alimbekov, as well as representatives of the leading opposition parties -- Azat, OSDP, and the Communist Party. One protestor, Takhirzhan Akmetov, threatened to cut off his own finger and send it to President Nazarbayev if Alimbekov is not released.

He was subsequently called in by the police for questioning.

¶5. Nurlan Alimbekov, born in 1964, is a graduate of Yekaterinburg State University. He worked for the Ministry of Information and later was a researcher at the Academy of Sciences and a lecturer at several universities in South Kazakhstan oblast. Before his arrest last year, Alimbekov, who purportedly published some articles in the opposition press, was unknown to the wider public. He has maintained his innocence and claims the case against him was fabricated.

Attempt to Seize Property of Agafe Church

¶6. Local authorities in the Karasay district of Almaty oblast are reportedly trying to seize the Agafe Evangelical Christian Church's land and building. A district prosecutor has filed a motion asking a local court to rule that the transfer of this property to the church was illegal. In 1997, a local official authorized the transfer of both the land and the building, which had previously been used for cultural events, to the Agafe church for free. According to a church representative, the church parish and missionaries from South Korea repaired the building. Some unidentified individuals now want to seize this lucrative property, including the two-story building and 1309 square-meter land plot, the church representative claimed. The district prosecutor alleges that the transfer was an illegal, unauthorized privatization.

Opposition Journalist Bapi Accused of Slander

¶7. A driver of one of the cars which reportedly surveilled opposition journalist Yermurat Bapi has filed a lawsuit against Bapi accusing him of slander, Bapi told Inkarnet internet radio in a June 5 interview. Bapi previously provided the license plate numbers of the cars to the Almaty office of the National Security Committee (KNB), and the KNB responded claiming they had identified the drivers. Bapi suggested that the KNB made the driver file the lawsuit.

Incident Involving Uzbek Refugees

¶8. On May 29, the Almaty police detained three Uzbek refugees, Zhobir Aslonov, Yelmurat Khamzayev, and Khamid Makhmudov, while they were leaving the UNHCR office in Almaty. Six police officers in civilian clothes handcuffed the refugees, put them in a car, and took them to a police station. Two other refugees managed to flee the scene.

¶9. The detained refugees allege that they were questioned by the police and KNB officers in a rude manner and were threatened with deportation. According to refugee Yelmurat Khamzayev, when he produced a refugee certificate issued by the UNHCR office, one of the officers told him: "You can use it as toilet paper as it has no value." Khamzayev was ultimately allowed to call his wife and managed to tell her about the detention. An hour later, a UNHCR representative and Denis Dzhivaga from the Human Rights Bureau NGO arrived at the police station. The refugees were released shortly thereafter on instructions from the prosecutor's office.

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